

**Op-Ed by Ambassadors and High Commissioners for
International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women
November 25, 2014**

Domestic violence should not happen to anybody— ever! But it does happen, and when we become aware, we should help. Maybe you have lived with abuse or maybe you work or live with someone who has suffered abuse. The International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women today spotlights the abuse that many women face on a daily basis and encourages action by community, local and national leaders to prevent further abuse. We should reflect on the progress made towards ending this violence and work together to improve the condition of women worldwide over the next sixteen days of activism and continue beyond that. Ending domestic violence is a challenge that all nations face, requiring cooperation across all levels of society--government, the private sector, and civil society. This is a human rights issue. This is an equal rights issue: all persons, including women, are entitled to equal protection under the law.

We must better understand the problem in order to take effective action to eliminate the scourge of domestic violence. So let us clear away some common myths:

Domestic violence is a problem in every community, around the world.

Nearly 2,000 cases of domestic violence were reported to the Mauritian Ministry of Gender Equality, Child Development, and Family Welfare in 2013--over 90% of which were against women. Recent surveys in Mauritius show that one in four women have experienced severely abusive behavior of a physical, sexual, or emotional nature from an intimate partner at some time in their lives. The same surveys show that the prevalence of intra-family violence is at least ten times higher than that reported to the police. This is not just a Mauritian problem; all our countries face similar problems. 22% of European women have suffered physical or sexual abuse from their partners, according to the European Parliament, and 43% have suffered psychological abuse. 30% of all female murder victims in the United States were killed by their husbands or boyfriends, according to Federal Bureau of Investigation statistics. Women are the victims in 87% of partner violence cases in Australia.

Domestic violence does not only happen to poor women, but all kinds of families and relationships. Persons of any class, culture, religion, sexual orientation, marital status, age and sex can be victims or perpetrators of domestic violence.

Alcohol, drug abuse, stress and mental illness do not cause domestic violence. They may accompany violence and may be used as an excuse by the abusers, but these are not the causes. Generally, domestic violence happens when an abuser has learned to abuse and chooses to abuse. Children who grow up in a home where domestic violence occurs live in fear and are more likely to become both perpetrators and victims of domestic violence.

No one deserves to be hit or abused. Physical violence, even among family members, is wrong and against the law. Protective laws exist here in Mauritius, and the criminal justice system must act, handling cases professionally, sensitively, and seriously.

It often is difficult for women to escape abuse. There are many reasons why women do not leave, such as for financial or childcare reasons. Not leaving does not mean that the situation is OK or that women want to be abused. The most dangerous time for an abuse victim frequently is when she tries to leave.

Domestic violence is a not only a personal problem between a husband and a wife. Too many Mauritians consider violence within the family to be a private matter, and too often law enforcement authorities do not consider this

violence as a crime. Reports suggest that victims have been turned away or, worse, subjected to threats and abuse from some police officers. Often, these women must return home and face escalating levels of violence. One such story that made headlines just last month, involved a young woman named Marie Queency Triton, who was stabbed by her husband when she refused to return to their home, having been subjected to years of domestic violence. In a separate case that same month, a mother of four was assaulted by her husband after the couple had already separated.

The curtain of privacy that traditionally governs family matters here in Mauritius should never constitute an excuse for turning a blind eye. The fears of being stigmatized or shamed are very real concerns for victims, especially in a society that is so closely knit. All governments are responsible for protecting their citizens from abuse, and if they fail to prevent, investigate, and punish such acts of violence with the full weight of the law, then they share in the responsibility for the abuses. Only when the Government takes action, will people be convinced that domestic abuse will no longer be tolerated in Mauritius. Mauritian victims of domestic violence will come forward when they are confident that the authorities and institutions in place will not only protect them, but also give them the justice they deserve. In partnership with local government agencies, non-governmental

organizations, and the media, we need to make it easier for victims to report abuse and make perpetrators of violence accountable for their crimes. We must ensure that victims of violence feel safe in seeking assistance and can readily access safe shelters.

Awareness of the problem in Mauritius is growing. Domestic violence is no longer the hidden crime. The press is paying attention. Mauritians—men and women, girls and boys—are calling for an end to violence. The Ministry of Gender Equality has ramped up programs to protect women. Laws to protect people against domestic violence are being strengthened. The police are taking action, including supporting the setting up of the Women in Uniform Network. We welcome these initiatives, but much remains to be done. In particular, Mauritius lacks sufficient shelters to protect families from abuse and the qualified resource people to assist those subject to abuse.

Violence against women is arguably the most widespread human rights violation of our time, causing terrible physical and emotional pain. We must not only help prevent violence – we must also work to provide women with economic opportunities, to ensure their equal participation in public life and repeal laws and practices that continue to discriminate against them.